

**Statement of the
Redwood Empire Food Bank
on the
Emergency Food Assistance Enhancement Act of 2001
Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
-Committee on Agriculture -
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry

June 21, 2001
Washington, DC**

Good morning Chairman Goodlatte, Ranking Member Clayton, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is David Goodman and I am the Executive Director of the Redwood Empire food Bank. The Redwood Empire Food Bank is a proud member of the California Association of Food Banks, and an affiliate of America's Second Harvest. We are located in Sonoma County, California, located 55 miles north of San Francisco.

The Redwood Empire Food Bank serves a five county region (Sonoma, Mendocino, Humboldt, Lake and Del Norte) that extends 320 miles along the coast to the Oregon border. In Sonoma County alone, our food reaches 37,000 people each month and provides more than 3.3 million meals annually. Our food is distributed through our own direct service programs (A Child's Portion and Senior Brown Bag), as well as through the efforts of more than 150 human service organizations such as, neighborhood food pantries, day-care centers, soup kitchens, shelters, and after-school programs.

Although the work of the Redwood Empire Food Bank is impressive, we are just one of many food banks that make up the safety net for low-income Californians. In fact, California food banks now distribute enough food to provide more than 184 million meals annually. Our food is distributed with the help of more than 5,000 community organizations, reaching 2.5 million people each month. No longer the grass roots operations of yesteryear, food banks have become critical players in California's, as well as the nation's safety net for people suffering from hunger or living on the edge of hunger.

As you are well aware, hunger is a powerful adversary in the lives of low-income people throughout our country. As a food banker, I am deeply concerned about my neighbors in need. I would like to take this time to share with you the reality of people we serve. Speaking from a local perspective, I can tell you that our recent economic boom has done little to help low-income families in Sonoma County. In fact, many families are worse off due to skyrocketing rents. In our county, workers must earn \$20.35 per hour in order to reasonably afford an average two-bedroom apartment. A quick calculation reveals the daunting reality for low-income people. Parents must hold a combined 3.25 full-time

jobs in order to make ends meet. Taking these figures into account, it is no surprise that food is not purchased so rent can be paid.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program

I have been asked to provide this committee with a “front line” perspective on hunger in our country. The issue at hand is whether we should reallocate up to \$40 million a year in unspent employment and training funds toward the purchase, transportation, storage and distribution of EFAP commodities.

It is important to begin by saying that EFAP commodities represent some of the highest quality foods that food banks are able to provide the people we serve. Many commodities are staple foods that have cross-cultural appeal. The Asian and Latino communities, for example, equally appreciate the rice. The tomato sauce and frozen ground beef work well in stews and, when served over commodities of pasta make a hearty meal. The canned apple juice works well for kids of all ages. The combination of rice cereal, dry milk and raisins ensures that children are sure to receive a nutritious breakfast – a great start to their day.

The key to a successful distribution of EFAP commodities is the availability of volunteers who are concerned about hunger in their community. This year alone, the Redwood Empire Food Bank’s volunteers will contribute more than 48,000 hours of their time – the equivalent of 24 full-time staff members. Without the help of volunteers, the stability of any one of our distribution sites in Sonoma County is in severe jeopardy. In fact, the Redwood Empire Food Bank recently completed a study that revealed that our volunteer corps is aging and the younger community is not stepping up to replace the. The significance here is that this is the structure upon which our nation depends to serve people in need.

In Sonoma County, we have 19 EFAP distribution sites. This year, we expect to receive and distribute 410,000 pounds of USDA commodities and 120,000 pounds of produce brought in through California’s “Donate, Don’t Dump” Program. The Redwood Empire Food Bank will receive \$42,000 this year to store, distribute and administer the 530,000 pounds of food. The contract amount covers approximately 39% of the actual cost of distributing the commodities.

It has been said that nothing in this world is free. The same holds true for commodities. Food banks do not receive financial compensation for the commodities they distribute beyond the fixed contract amount. The result is that each increase in commodities without related financial support for the storage and distribution of the food becomes a loss leader for food banks. As non-profit organizations, food banks have the luxury of not turning a profit, but as in any business, we cannot afford to lose money.

In California, the EFAP Program distributes a large amount of produce through its Denote, Don’t Dump Program. This program works with farmers throughout the state, ensuring that the maximum amount of edible produce reaches people in need. For those

of us on the front line, we need the ability to effectively store and distribute the produce. This requires proper refrigeration both in the warehouse, as well as on the trucks that transport the produce to our pantry distributions.

Currently, our food bank only has one refrigerated truck. Simply stated, only half of the available produce reaches people in need during the summer months. The remaining produce languishes in our warehouse, waiting for the next available refrigerated truck.

In order to take full advantage of the wide range of commodities (dry, frozen and fresh) that the EFAP program has to offer, it seems prudent that an investment in infrastructure for food banks across the country is necessary.

The Food Stamp Program

As important as the EFAP commodities are to feeding people in need in our country, we must remember that they are meant to meet both emergency as well as temporary circumstances. They are not *the solution* to ending hunger in America. For food bankers, our primary concern is ensuring that hungry people receive the food they need *today*. Once today's needs are taken care of, our attention turns to their needs for tomorrow. Therein lies the problem with placing too many resources with EFAP commodities as a solution to our nation's hunger needs. The EFAP commodities are meant to be emergency provisions, yet they are filling a chronic hunger problem in our country.

Throughout California, EFAP food distributions are run by volunteers and take place at times that best meet the volunteers' availability. As a result, many distributions are held on weekdays during the middle of the day – a time that absolutely inconvenient for people who have moved from welfare to work, or for those who are in the process of finding work. They are placed with a difficult choice of staying at work and forgoing the food they and their family requires, or leaving work without pay (if it is in fact an option to leave work) in order to obtain a bag of groceries. This situation definitely runs contrary to a move toward personal self-sufficiency and upward professional mobility.

The long-term plan must be to utilize the Food Stamp Program in a way that effectively supports low-wage earners, and provides adequate nutrition for their families. What we cannot accept as a society is for hunger to be the price that people pay for having low-wage jobs. With the changes that were brought about by welfare reform, food stamps can now serve as an economic bridge, a nutrition enhancement, or an economic stabilizer for working Americans. Food stamps provide families with a stable economic and nutritional platform from which they can improve their position in life. Ironically, access to food stamps in and of themselves is possibly the best insurance that people entering the workforce will be able to eventually leave government supported food programs entirely. In other words, a person who stays in his/her job, demonstrating his/her ability to make a valuable contribution, provides a great deal more confidence than someone who must leave to either dine in a soup kitchen or stand in line at a neighborhood pantry.

A successful Food Stamp Program will solve many of our troubles. Gaining an understanding of why nearly 50% of available participants in California currently are not participating in the Food Stamp Program and figuring out how to help them would be a good first step. The likely culprit is the multitude of legislative and administrative hurdles that exist. The upcoming reauthorization of food stamps and TEFAP in the Farm Bill provides us with a golden opportunity to reform food stamps to better support working families and to reduce red tape for everyone. A new bipartisan bill makes a good start on these needed reforms, so I ask you today to also cosponsor HR 2142, the Nutrition Assistance for Working Families and Seniors Act. If we can be successful in enrolling qualified people, California's economy alone would be stimulated by nearly \$1.5 billion dollars. Sonoma County would realize more than \$6 million in additional commerce. And farmers and manufacturers would benefit as demand for goods increased at the merchant level.

Conclusion

Should we reallocate up to \$40 million a year in unspent employment and training funds toward the purchase, transportation, storage and distribution of EFAP commodities? Of course we should. People (moms, dads, grandparents, children) are hungry now, and food banks are desperately seeking food to keep them healthy and productive citizens. There isn't a single hunger relief advocate who could justify ignoring the needs of people who are hungry today in lieu of a long-term goal of feeding more people in the future.

This, however, should only be in the beginning of what needs to become the solution to America's hunger problem. The government needs to recognize the role that food banks and other hunger relief organizations play in caring for its citizens. Increasing the amount of EFAP commodities for food banks is a tremendous idea; lacking "operational" support on the local level, however, the idea quickly becomes an untenable proposal. In California, food banks already receive only half of the funding that it takes to operate the EFAP program. An increase in food to the local level, without additional operational support, is simply beyond our economic capabilities.

The face of hunger has changed in our communities. A few years back our attention would have been focused strictly on the homeless. Well, you can be sure that the homeless are still with us, and hunger has a strong hold on them. The difference now, however, is that hunger has reached out with its other hand and grabbed a hold of the working poor.

All of us who work on hunger issues must think about how each person is impacted by the lack of effective funding. The very fact that the government works in consort with food banks on nutrition programs demonstrates that we share the belief that in this great country, no one should go hungry or lack adequate nutrition. In the end, "the best measure of a civilized society is how it cares for its poor."

Thank you for your consideration.